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SUBJECT: FERIZAJ LEADERS AGREE TO REPAIR ROOF ON VANDALIZED  
CHURCH

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED, PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. On October 6 Ferizaj/Urosevac Municipal leaders promised visiting poloff and a U.S. sergeant involved in civil-military operations in the area that they would pay for the August theft of the copper roof of the St. Uros church. (The thief, who was apprehended shortly after the incident, remains in custody.) After the meeting, these leaders issued a statement condemning such acts and restating their agreement to have the municipality pay for repair. This incident is, unfortunately, one in a series involving robbery of roofing materials of Serbian Orthodox churches throughout Kosovo, but at least municipalities are taking responsibility both for repair and apprehension of perpetrators. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) In recent months, there have been a number of acts of vandalism against Serbian Orthodox churches, often involving theft of valuable copper roofing materials. In one case, Podujevo municipal authorities strongly condemned the incident and repaired the roof using municipal funds. Orthodox Church leaders have repeatedly asked for stationary protection at religious sites, as opposed to roving patrols.

13. (SBU) According to a U.S. sergeant involved in civil-military operations in the area, in August a thief stole approximately 25 meters of copper roofing from the St. Uros church, the main Serbian Orthodox church in downtown Ferizaj/Urosevac. He said that a Kosovo Albanian witness called the police, the thief was apprehended, and remains in custody. Because the theft left the church vulnerable to further damage from rain and weather, the sergeant said he personally paid for and carried out a temporary repair job using plastic sheeting to cover exposed areas on the roof. He noted that the Ferizaj Kosovo Albanian fire brigade willingly assisted by providing a fire vehicle with a long ladder to access the roof; he also brought a Kosovo Serb internally displaced person (IDP) living in the municipality who had experience with roofing to assist with the labor.

14. (SBU) In response to a request from Father Sava, the moderate Serb priest in Decani monastery, Poloff and the U.S. sergeant met with Ferizaj Deputy Mayor Gafurr Imeri and the municipal CEO on October 6. Poloff explained that the Church Reconstruction Implementation Commission (RIC), which previously replaced the doors to the St. Uros church, can only use its funds to repair damage incurred during the March 2004 riots. She urged the municipality to take concrete action to repair the damage, and to use its influence to prevent such incidents in the future. The sergeant said that based on his assessment, it would take approximately 1000 euros worth of copper or 400 euros worth of tin (a cheaper substitute) to replace the stolen material.

15. (SBU) The CEO agreed to repair the roof using municipal funds, and said he will do it "properly," using copper. He said he would bring the issue before the Municipal Board of Directors on October 9, and would send an assessment team that same day to estimate labor costs. He pointed out that other municipalities make public statements about multi-ethnicity and reconciliation, but said that in Ferizaj they would rather demonstrate such sentiments through action.

The CEO also mentioned that he would issue a public statement condemning such incidents and urging citizens to refrain from acts of vandalism. He added that the best way to protect the church would be for St. Uros leader Father Gjika and other Serbs to return and bring the church back into regular use. He said the municipality would welcome them, but currently does not have the funds to rebuild Gjika's home, which was destroyed during the March 2004 riots. (Note: On October 9, the Municipal CEO issued a statement condemning the vandalism and calling on residents to be vigilant in protecting Ferizaj's cultural heritage. The Board of Directors also unanimously approved the CEO's decision to use municipal funds to repair the damaged roof.

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End Note.)

16. (SBU) COMMENT. We are gratified to see ethnic Albanian municipal leaders saying and doing the right thing with regard to vandalism of Serbian Orthodox churches. There are now at least two municipalities -- Ferizaj and Podujevo -- which have stepped up and taken responsibility. We will follow up to see not only that repairs are done, but that perpetrators are convicted and sentenced. END COMMENT.

17. (U) Post clears this message in its entirety for release to Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari.  
KAIDANOW